



And We Ourselves Heard

A sermon by YMI founder, the Rev. Harold E. Masback, III. Focal scripture: Exodus 24:12-18 and Matthew 17:1-9.



AND WE OURSELVES HEARD

The Rev. Harold E. Masback, III, February 10, 2002

Exodus 24:12-18

12 The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." 15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

A face shining like the sun. Clothing dazzling white. A booming voice out of a radiant cloud. Today's readings draw us into two of the classic, thousand-megawatt, encounters between God and man, two of the most famous theophanies of Scripture. Each of these accounts teaches us something about the history of God and God's people. Each offers insight into the nature of God and the nature of Jesus His Son. But this morning I want to focus on an even more precious gift embedded in these stories: the gift of a template, a guide for our own, personal encounters with the living God, for our own spiritual experiences.

Each of the theophanies in this morning's readings was literally and spiritually a "mountain top" experience. In fact, did you ever notice how many of the Biblical encounters between

God and man occur on cloudy mountain tops or on wave-tossed seas or in the windswept wilderness? Moses, Elijah, Jesus on mountains; Jonah and Jesus and Peter and Paul on stormy seas; Israel, John the Baptist, and Jesus in the wilderness.

I want to suggest this morning that these stories reflect something about our human experience of mountains and wilderness and ocean that parallels our experience of God's Spirit. I want to suggest that in each of these stories there is a pattern: a pattern that applies equally to earthbound adventure and spiritual adventure. I want to suggest that if we pick up on the pattern it can help us recognize and respond to the ways God's Spirit moves in our own lives.

The pattern has three elements: first: a call away from our comfort zone, out of our customary habits, away from the material and psychological baggage that shapes our daily existence. Second, an openness, a humility, an attentive turn to the new ways of this new environment. And third, an acceptance, an adherence, an obedience to these new ways. In traditional religious language we would call these three phases: call, repentance and discipleship.

We each know this pattern from our own adventures with mountains or deserts or seas. Five years ago, my son Owen talked me into climbing a mountain with him while we were visiting Yosemite National Park. I only agreed to climb at Yosemite because I thought the peaks there would be lower than those at the other mountain parks we toured.

Well, never underestimate the creativity of a New Canaan High School senior with a topographical map. Owen pored over the map while I drove, and darned if he didn't find a Mount Dana - at over 13,000 feet the highest peak by far in the park. And when I say "in" the park, I mean just barely straddling the park's outer boundary, miles and miles from the valley.

But, a promise is a promise, so early on a beautiful, cloudless, day we set off for the peak. Now, you don't want to carry any unnecessary weight on a climb like that, so I hiked in shorts and a t-shirt, with just a windbreaker, water, and a trail map in my day pack. "Let's call this the move out of my comfort zone, stripped down from my usual baggage of life" phase, the "call" phase of the climb.

After four hours of hard climbing we had cleared the tree line. Two hours later we had hiked across snow fields to about 12,000 feet and were just about an hour from the summit. While we were resting, a lone, puffy cloud drifted over us. Looking up, Owen said, "Dad: we've got to make a move and we've got to make it now. Either we have to find shelter under a boulder here above the tree line, or we have to run back down for the trees. In these mountains, one cloud present means more clouds coming. And more clouds coming in these mountains means a thunderstorm, and we've got to be under cover when it hits."

Well, I really didn't like either of those options, and neither made any sense by my flatlander standards. I had lugged myself up a six-hour climb, and we were only one hour from the peak. And there was just one, small cloud in a sunny sky of blue. Surely there was time to make the

summit and then scramble back down. But even though I didn't agree with Owen, I knew he knew far more about the mountains than I did, so I reluctantly followed him as we trudged back down. Of course, I was kind of dragging my feet so when I was proven right and the cloud passed out of sight we could reverse course without having given up too much altitude.

Don't you know within 30 minutes, we were overtaken by a howling wind and a raging hail and a snow storm while we were still high above the tree line. You might call this the repentance phase of my adventure. For I now turned absolutely humble, absolutely open and absolutely attentive to whatever wisdom or guidance might get us off that mountain alive.

I looked ahead at Owen and said, "Hey, Owen! Two questions: "what is that high pitched whistling sound and why is your hair standing on end." Owen listened for a second, felt his hair and turned and shouted "Get down, Dad! Get down now." Well the newly humble, newly open and newly attentive Dad was on the ground in a second, and good thing too, for as Owen knew - and as Dad did not - the whistling sound was the sound of electrons lining up for the lightning phase of our afternoon entertainment, and seconds later lightning started striking all around us. Let's call this the acceptance, adherence and obedience to the ways of the mountains phase, the discipleship phase of my excursion. Call, repentance, and discipleship, the three phases of mountaineering.

Of course, we can see the same pattern of call, repentance, and discipleship in the spiritual adventure outlined in this morning's scripture lessons. We enter the story of Jesus' transfiguration when the disciples have already lived out a fair bit of spiritual experience with their new master. They have answered a call away from jobs, families and home; Peter has turned and been open enough to the Spirit to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God; and they have already exhibited the obedience of following Jesus up and down the trails of Palestine.

But today they are called to an even higher adventure. The story makes the first phase, the call phase, explicit, it begins, "Jesus . . . led them up a high mountain, by themselves." But when they see Jesus transfigured they are still struggling with their flatlander spiritual ways, still fighting the openness required of them, for Peter immediately asserts his old ways, trying to make concrete, trying to domesticate, the transfiguration experience by building permanent little shrines for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But God will have none of this, and they are engulfed in a wild, radiant cloud. Only then, only when they are overshadowed and overawed are they open enough, humble enough, attentive enough to hear the ultimate spiritual insight: "This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him."

It is a frightening experience, but they find they are not alone: Jesus is there with them; and they fall in behind him with a renewed obedience, a renewed discipleship for the service and challenges that lie ahead. Call, repentance, and discipleship

And now I want to ask you if you cannot see the same pattern in our own spiritual lives, in our

grand pilgrimages like the Youth Group mission trips and in the smaller, subtler encounters with the Spirit in our daily lives.

I think it's easy enough to see the pattern in the mission trip to Chicago. Each and every one of you mission fish has answered a call away from your comfort zone, away from your customary habits, away from the material and psychological baggage that shapes your daily lives. And make no mistake about it, this call is from God. Oh, of course you're going for all kinds of reasons. But that hunger, that yearning in your heart to experience the love, the presence of God, the meaningful service you've heard about from past trips, that hunger is God's Spirit stirring up the grace of desire, calling you on a mission as surely as Jesus called his disciples up the mountain.

Now, it is up to you to be open, to be attentive, to be aware of how the Spirit is moving on the trip itself. If you try to recreate a comfort zone of old friends and old habits - of self-reliance and self-centeredness, you will miss the Spirit's gifts. But if you keep yourself open: if you attend to the Spirit's subtle nudges to reach out to that colleague you hardly know, to trust your team enough to share your dreams and fears at vespers: to serve God to the limits of your energies; to embrace Rebecca's family of faith that is awaiting you with open arms in Chicago; and if you then adhere, accept these new directions, this new life of love, then you too will experience God's greatest gift, the presence of his Spirit, of his love with you. And you too will accomplish mighty things by the power of almighty God in Chicago and you too will return to this Meeting House on Youth Sunday to tell us how you too have been transformed, transfigured by God's grace.

Which brings me at last to the subtle pattern of spiritual experience in our daily lives. And I can imagine some of the objections arising in some of your hearts right now as I speak. Perhaps you are thinking you are not a spiritual person and you don't even know what I mean when I speak of spiritual experience. To this I answer the Spirit is nothing more complicated than God's Spirit present to your spirit, the power of God's love experienced in your life, enabling you to love where you couldn't love, or showing you truth where you couldn't see, or inspiring holy awe where you had felt nothing, or giving wings to a prayer that had felt leaden. [Tillich, "The Spiritual Presence," *The Eternal Now*.]

Perhaps you then think that being called out of your comfort zone sounds like superstition and you want to stay rational; or that repenting and turning to a a new way of being sounds untested and you want to trust the ways that have served you well enough so far; or that discipleship sounds like sacrificing your independence and you want to remain free. To this I answer that you need only open embrace the Spirit already moving inside you and it will show you that God is the true reality; that the spiritual way transcends the neediness and illusions of the self; and that obedience to Jesus is the discipleship that frees your soul from the bondage to the self. [Tillich, "The Spiritual Presence," *The Eternal Now*.]

And finally, perhaps you think that you do not have this Spiritual power and that you have never had such an experience. To this I ask you to listen as I list some of the ways theologian Paul Tillich taught the Spirit has been experienced and ask if some have not occurred in your own life. The spirit can suddenly suggest to you that someone needs a call or word of encouragement, and though you feel inadequate you make the call and are astonished at how your stammered word helped them in the depths of their soul at precisely their moment of need. Or someone you had rejected or thought was of no use surprises you by offering you a word of comfort just when you needed it.

The Spirit can lead you into despair that your career has been drained of meaning, but then it can open an unseen door to an entirely new vocation. The Spirit can reveal to you that you have hurt someone deeply, but then it can give you the courage and the right word to bring about a reconciliation. The Spirit can transform your aggression into serenity and transfigure your depression into stability and joy. . [Tillich, "The Spiritual Presence," *The Eternal Now.*]

And if now you are beginning to see how the Spirit reaches out to every lived life, what can you do? You can listen to it and let its call lead you out of your comfort zone. You can turn to it and be open to its truth. You can respond to its call and follow the Christ from whom the Spirit comes. And then with the Peter we will all be able to say, "for we have been eyewitnesses of his majesty... and . . . We ourselves have heard his voice." (2 Peter 1:16-18.) Thanks be to God. Amen.